

**Statement of R. Thomas Buffenbarger, International President
International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
Before the United States Senate Science, Transportation and Commerce
Committee Hearing on Airline Labor Relations
April 25, 2001**

I am Tom Buffenbarger, International President of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. The IAM represents 130 thousand employees in the air transportation system. We provide first-class service not only in the United States but also throughout the world. We are the largest union in air transportation in the world. As always, our number one priority is safety. All of our members are subject to the Railway Labor Act, an Act that is misused and abused by the employer.

I am here to tell you today, Mr. Chairman, that we object to this Administration and Congress interfering with our collective bargaining process. In the past our members shouldered the risks and made sacrifices so that their carriers could compete. They saved their jobs and they saved their carriers. That is as true for TWA and USAir as it is for United Airlines. At that time, there were no hearings and no Congressional queries regarding our welfare or our job security.

There are many critics of the air transportation system in the United States. However, they all ignore the facts. Airport construction and expansions are almost frozen today. Airports are operating at full capacity and subject to weather delays that have a lingering ripple effect on travel. There are more business travelers and more families that choose air travel because of affordable fares. This has proven to be good for the American economy.

The IAM has always sought to have our carriers maintain a competitive edge. Successful carriers have grown and expanded. Successful carriers also buy Boeing

airplanes that we manufacture. Within the airline industry, the collective bargaining process is virtually ongoing and never ending. The same carriers that asked us for help in the past manipulate the Railway Labor Act to their advantage and deny us our right to share in the profits of our work, risk, and sacrifice.

The Railway Act is managed and enforced by the National Mediation Board. It delays negotiations. It strings them out for two, three, four and even five years. When the carriers exhaust the time limits and procedures as set forth by the Board they then turn to the court system to seek injunctions against our members.

Repeatedly, they have chosen to do whatever they can to avoid accountability at the bargaining table. They have found it is more cost effective to delay and prolong negotiations than to reach an agreement. The immediate and direct result is that the employees, our members, have no faith in a system that is broken.

However, I must stress that these same carriers broke the system by their own design.

This is particularly true at United Airlines, where we are currently involved in negotiations. I am not going to comment on the instant issues at the negotiating table. In years past United Airlines told us that if changes weren't made in our agreements then the airline would fold. We listened and acted responsibly. We saved the airline when we bought the company.

Today, this company has a sudden lapse in memory. We continue to demand that they meet with us and bargain in good faith but they choose to avoid the bargaining table with the help of the National Mediation Board. Seven years ago if we had acted that same way when they came to us, United Airlines would not exist today.

Mr. Chairman, I can never forget our members and their families and the sacrifices they have made over the years. They gave up buying new homes, tuition for their children to attend better schools, having their medical insurance and pensions upgraded and many other items that maintain a quality of life for working people that others take for granted.

My hope, Mr. Chairman, is that you and your colleagues on the Committee on Labor and Human Resources can find a way to insert a drop dead date into the Railway Labor Act. Give both sides fair notice that negotiations will end. Give both sides an incentive to reach a fair agreement.

I cannot stress enough the fact that our members are not responsible for travel delays in the air transportation industry. Weather, capacity, equipment availability, and a safety record that is second to none in the world must be included in this discussion. I am prepared to discuss these matters as well as proposed airline mergers and other problems within the industry today.